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Director Michael Wallin Examines the Idealized Other

Soul Enchantment

Filmmaker Michael Wallin at home (Photo: Rick Gerharter)

by Patrick D. Hoctel

Local gay filmmaker Michael Wallin, standing in his living room under the Haitian sculpture, *Hitching a Ride With the Devil,* in the photograph at right, sees a definite connection between this work and his new film. "I see myself hitching a ride with the devil artistically in this project," he says, "in that it bares a certain part of myself that's uncomfortable and makes me somewhat vulnerable."

"This film will not fall into the politically correct category. It's voyeuristic, and some might see it as objectifying people, exploitive." —Michael Wallin

The 44-year-old director of such films as *Decodings,* a found-footage study of male intimacy that won the prestigious Grand Prize at the Thomas Edison Black Maria Festival and was selected for the Whitney Biennial, got some help financing his latest effort from an unexpected source. In June of last year, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), while still under the iron thumb of Anne Imelda Radice, awarded him a $19,000 grant for what he terms a "frankly homoerotic" proposal for his film.

Recently the *B.A.R.* talked with Wallin, who's currently pursuing an M.A. in psychology at the California Institute of Integral studies while doing an internship at Operation Concern, about the NEA grant, the contest to name his new film, his collaboration with gay novelist Stephen Beachy (*The Whistling Song),* and men and mystery, among other things.

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Patrick D. Hoctel: What was your reaction when you heard about the NEA grant?

Michael Wallin: I was very surprised. I absolutely didn't expect it. My proposal was frankly homoerotic — that was clearly what the film was about, gay sexuality. I might've altered the language and not used the words "penis" or "cock," but those were the only things that were changed from proposals I've submitted to other organizations. The work I submitted with the proposal was *Decodings,* which is also very homoerotic, particularly in the language, the text. When I expressed disbelief [about getting the grant], I was told that she'd [Radice] signed off on it.

How much are you budgeting for the film?

I'm looking at a cost of $30,000-$33,000. The grant will pay for about two-thirds of the film.

Tell me about it. What's it called? What's it about?

At this point the film has no title. I had a working title for my grant proposals, *Further Clues to a Self-Discovery,* which is completely nondescript and doesn't say anything at all. I played around with some other possible titles — not to actually use but to get an idea of something that might be more relevant — but they've already been taken, such as *Law of Desire* or *Rules of Attraction.* I'd like to announce that there's a contest to name the film, and you may win $100 if you come up with the right title.

The film is about — this is the hardest part — enchantment. Enchantment with another individual that you know very little about, their physical beauty and the beauty of their soul, perhaps. But it's a lot about the process of how we construct a fantasy, how we project desired qualities onto this idealized person and go from there. But it goes deeper than that. It moves to a level of longing, yearning, and need for connection between two people. That's the big picture.

Is it near completion?

The film is maybe 95 percent shot, and I'm now in the editing process. My intention is to have the film finished sometime this year. I shot the whole film, except for a few

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sections which required a more elaborate production crew — scenes of pieces by the gay men's performance group, High Risk, and short monologues by a young actor friend of mine, Eric, which I folded into the work.

How does the High Risk Group figure in?

The reason — one of the reasons — I used the High Risk Group was because the focus of the film — at least two years ago — was a High Risk member, Nic Pereira. Nic dropped out of my project for personal reasons, although he's still fundamental to the film. But now there's no one person who's the center of the film. There are 13 individuals who I've filmed. It's been much more democratized. In a sense, though, the film is about me and my processes — and presumably those of most other people on the planet.

Going from one subject to 13 seems like ... .

The film has changed only in that sole respect — instead of having one person as the focus, they're 13 who are focused on to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how it goes in the editing. There are three of those who I find are more compelling for me, and I'm quite certain I'll use more footage of them than the others. But it won't be about my connection with one individual.

You said the film was about "enchantment" — with another individual you know little about. But in the course of making this film, you must form some sort of relationship with your subjects, and I'd imagine that affects how you view them.

I'm glad you brought that up, because that gets at a very important element, which is basically how fragile, how ephemeral, these kinds of fantasies can be — and how easily they can be destroyed. Someone can open their mouth, and the fantasy will evaporate. Someone can take off their clothes, and it will ... change.

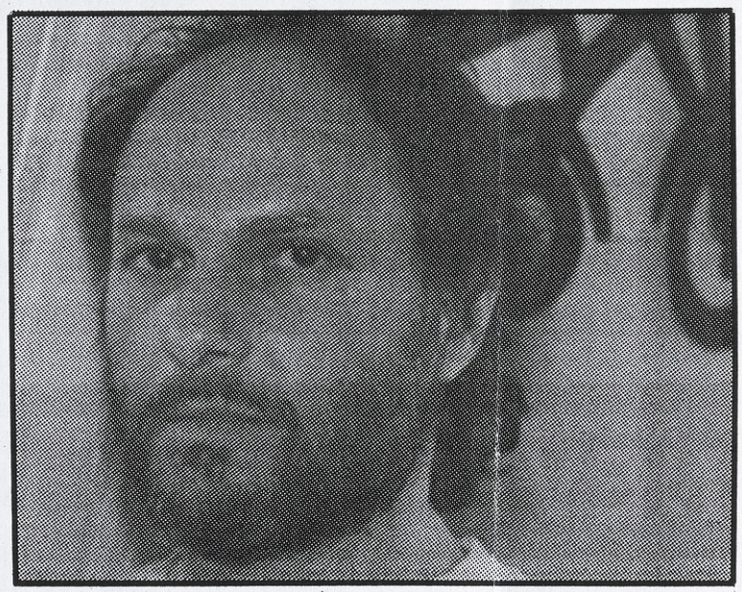
Did that happen for you?

Absolutely. It happened *a lot*. And it was a very interesting process. That's part of what I hope to convey in the film. We wrap this person in a kind of idealized clothing or whatever — figuratively and literally — and what's wrapped up there very often is something that doesn't exist, except in one's head.

That gets at another point of the film, which is what are we after, what kind of connection are we looking for.

Did any of the 13 you worked with retain their mystery for you afterwards?

The three that I'm going to use more footage of did — and do. In gay male life such a premium is placed on looks and appearances. Not that these people in the film are necessarily Adonises or fit any stereotype of gay beauty, it's what they sparked in me.



Michael Wallin (Photo: Rick Gerharter)

But it's still a matter of surface appearance in some way, although I imagine it goes deeper. I invest them with a great deal more, anyway.

How does your psychology work affect — influence — your film work?

It's not giving me as much time as I would like to devote to my film. That's one thing. [Laughs.] Psychology is an interest that I've had forever. Some of my films have dealt more directly or indirectly with certain psychological issues in that realm [of his new film]. I see them as interconnected yet separate at the same time. I don't use filmmaking as therapy or film my therapy sessions. There's a certain way in which as a filmmaker you're tuned in to being a keen observer of the scene, visually and otherwise, and as a therapist, you're also in the observer role.

You've collaborated with writers in the past — Michael Blumlein on Decodings. *Is that difficult for you? How did you and Stephen Beachy hook up?*

One of the reasons the film has taken so long is that the original writer I was working with dropped out of the project after a year. I needed to find a new writer. Stephen was recommended to me by Rob Epstein. I read *The Whistling Song* and was quite impressed and struck by it on a number of levels — very visual, very perceptive, imaginative. We've just started, but I'm really excited about working with him. It's going very well.

Working with other people is challenging. It's hard to give up part of the creative control, but it's also enriching to bring somebody else's perspective to the project and incorporate it.

When we were talking before, you said this project bared a part of yourself that made you uncomfortable and somewhat vulnerable. Explain that remark.

This film will not fall into the politically correct category. It's voyeuristic, and some might see it as objectifying people, exploitive. The subjects of the film tend to be much younger men than me.

The film addresses AIDS in not a direct way, which might be problematic for some. For me the horror of AIDS, more than anything else almost, is that it can destroy or explode the notion of physical beauty in a way that's so awful. And that's part of the subtext. An important part.

I see the film as very sex-positive, gay-positive, and it sort of traffics in the notions of what's beautiful, what's our composite sexual fantasy, what are those elements. In that sense it fights it [AIDS], but it doesn't ignore it.

In all these areas, I'm not making an educational film or a propaganda film or a documentary. For me the best art is not made by consensus — or motivated by political correctness. It comes out of being true to one's vision, even if that vision makes the audience uncomfortable — or [laughs] makes me uncomfortable, which it definitely does sometimes. ▼